
FRIEND OF THE COURT
NEWS RELEASE



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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**Kent County FOC Offers Programs, Amnesty to Address
Bench Warrants for Child Support**

GRAND RAPIDS – Kent County Circuit Court issues about 3,500 bench warrants every year for parents who fail to stay up-to-date on child support and refuse to appear in court to discuss the matter. These warrants reflect more than 6,000 children who are not receiving funding needed to feed and care for them. Kent County Friend of the Court (FOC) believes that there can be better support for these children, offering parents several opportunities to review their cases and put them in a better place to care for their children. Starting later this summer, the Sheriff's Department will also assign two deputies to address bench warrants.

FOC is establishing the Responsible Parent Program, focused on job placement and building trust between the FOC and the community. "We are assigning staff to help payers who work closely with us to address barriers and become better informed of their options," said Dan Fojtik, Kent County Friend of the Court Director. "Our caseworkers will work with qualified payers who want to resolve their warrant without arrest through diligence in obtaining employment and following their court order for support."

Grand Rapids agencies **Lifequest Urban Outreach Center** and **Strong Fathers** plan to partner with FOC to actively recruit eligible payers for the program, giving a priority to those with bench warrants, and mentor those who are enrolled. "We at Lifequest support creating compassion in the collection of child support via community support and oversight," said Pastor Jerry Bishop of Lifequest. "We know, through our assistance and education, we can foster stronger co-parenting and parent-child relationships."

FOC will start the program in August by offering an amnesty event for those parents who have outstanding bench warrants, then working to engage parents in the Responsible Parenting Program. "The Kent County Friend of the Court plays a major role in the lives of many families in our County," said Tony Jolliffi, Strong Fathers/Fatherhood Initiative Coordinator at the Grand Rapids African American Health Institute. "The Responsible Parenting Program should be a good step towards viewing parenting time as equal to a support order. By offering co-parenting classes and other parent skill building initiatives, we should see a significant change in every aspect of our county. A solid Family Court reduces caseloads in Criminal Court."

FOC will partner with Lifequest for an amnesty event (**FOR FOC WARRANTS ONLY**) on Friday, August 12, from 9:30 a.m. until 3:30 p.m. at Lifequest, located at 1050 Fisk Road SE in Grand Rapids (between Kalamazoo and Fuller, just north of Hall). Persons with warrants are strongly encouraged to attend, where they can consult with a FOC case manager without fear of arrest. "The Friend of the Court wants to work with our parents to make sure the support is fair, equitable, and up-to-date," said Judge Kathleen Feeney, Presiding Judge of the

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Kent County Family Court. “This amnesty program will give our caseworkers an opportunity to review caseloads and help parents get back on track to be in good standing with the courts.” (*Amnesty is not honored for warrants on other charges.*)

Payers will be screened during this event to determine if they qualify for enrollment in FOC’s Responsible Parent Program. In some cases, FOC will initiate support reviews for those who are unable to comply with their support order. During the month of August, the FOC will also offer amnesty during its walk-in hours on Tuesday mornings from 8:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., and Thursday afternoons from 1:00 p.m. until 4:00 p.m.

Starting later this summer, FOC will utilize two Kent County Sheriff Deputies for bench warrant enforcement. Their first priority will be meeting with payers living out-of-county who have a warrant but owe for a child living in Kent County. Many counties across the State have similar programs with warrant officers, including Muskegon and Ottawa. “Enforcement is and will remain focused mostly on those parents who owe support, are earning enough to pay, but refuse to follow the order of the court,” said Undersheriff Michelle Young. “Our goal is to safeguard the children of Kent County and ensure they are getting the support they need from parents who can pay. Even a partial payment is far better to us than putting parents in the Correctional Facility, where they are unable to earn money to apply towards support.” Funding for the Sheriff Deputies’ positions comes from new medial incentive payments from the State.

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